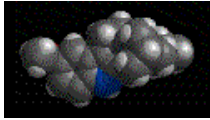


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The Bwiti Religion and the psychoactive plant *Tabernanthe iboga* (Equatorial Africa)

Giorgio Samorini

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variety iboga fruit

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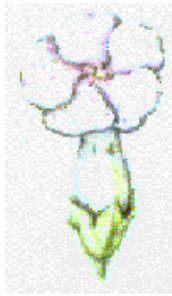
Introduction

The use of vegetable hallucinogens by humans for religious purposes is very ancient, probably even older than its use for healing, magic or teaching purposes. The profound alterations in one's state of consciousness brought about by the use of a hallucinogen has served as a founding axis for religious systems, and in the development of established religions throughout the history of humanity.

Even today, we are witness to the birth of new religious "psychedelic" movements. Their renewed presence is evidence of the actuality and at the same time the atemporality of the values associated with the correct social use of sacred plants. Two large religious movements which incorporate the use of vegetable hallucinogens have emerged during the past 150 years, both syncretic of Christianity and both consolidated at the national and ethnic level: the Native American Church of the North American Indians, which uses *peyote* (*Lophophora williamsii*) and the *Bwiti*, practiced by the people of Fang and other locations of Occidental Equatorial Africa which use the *iboga* (*Tabernanthe iboga* Baillon, Apocynaceae).¹

During the spring of 1991, while on my own personal research in Gabon, I had my first contact with the Bwiti religion. I visited Bwitists temples at several of the villages scattered throughout the tropical jungle and talked to officials and participants of the cult. I was allowed to participate in the Bwitist Easter festivities in a small village about forty kilometers from the capital of Libreville. The inhabitants of this village (fifty people including many children) belong to the ethnic tribe Fang (whose linguistic origin is Bantu), and to the Bwitist sect Ndeya Kanga. I was accepted with enthusiasm and hospitality, and being the first white man to participate in their rituals, with a certain degree of curiosity.

In contrast to the Peyotl Religion, conceived by the Indians as exclusively their own (it being a redemption movement of their own people), Bwiti is considered by its members as a monotheistic universal religion, accessible to anyone who approaches it with respect and humility, black or white. Even among those sects most syncretic of Christianity there is widespread hope that the white man will become more familiar with the Bwiti. An officiating

T. *iboga* Flower

member voiced his hope that someday the Bwiti becomes known at the very core of western culture, in Europe, just as Christianity came to Equatorial Africa many centuries ago.

The Bwitist Easter lasts four days and nights, from Thursday to Easter Sunday. In the evenings the sacred host, the Iboga, is taken collectively. I participated in the *iboga* communion, sung and danced with others during the four nights, with a progression of the amount of *iboga* ingested, and the enthusiasm and merriment experienced by all. For me personally it was a surprise; I am familiar with the study of hallucinogenic cults of the past, and others which could be considered ethnographic "residues" of such cults. In Gabon, in the Bwiti, I found a "psychedelic" religious cult pure and alive. Despite the vast bibliography in both the anthropological and ethnographical fields available on the subject (see bibliography, especially James Fernandez and Stanislaw Swiderski), its importance has not been fully understood by western scholars in the multidisciplinary field of hallucinogen study.

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The Ibogaine Dossier

In this article, I propose a general vision of the Bwiti; its history, its rituals and complex mythology. The *iboga* plant, a hallucinogen whose potency is comparable to the *peyote* and to the Andean San Pedro (*Trichocereus pachanoi*), and the psychic experiences which follow its ingestion are the foundation al the Bwitist creed.

The History of Bwiti

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Bwiti religion is widespread in Gabon, both in the interior of the jungle where it originated and in the capital, Libreville. During the last twenty years it has crossed its frontiers and reached Cameroon, Congo, Zaire, and Equatorial Guinea. In the latter, the Bwitist community is somewhat clandestine because of the energetic opposition of the Catholic missions.

According to the Bwitist genesis, the hallucinogenic properties of the *iboga* were first discovered by the Pygmies in the interior of the jungle. They in turn passed their knowledge on the neighboring people, the Apindji and the Mitsogho, who started the first Bwitist rituals. Later on, this knowledge was passed on to the Fang, the Eshira and other ethnic groups throughout southern Gabon. Within the Fang the Bwitist movement, due to continuous reform and review of its creed, become more and more distant from other tribal cults, which it in part substituted. In particular, the original Bwiti assumed certain characteristics of another ancestral cult, the Byeri, in whose rituals a different hallucinogen was used, *alan* (plural *melan*). The Byeri advocated a private cult practiced by the descendants of patrilinear families. At the climax of the initiation ceremony, the initiate, under the influence of a strong dose al the *alan* root (the euphorbiaceous *Alchornea floribunda*) was shown the skulls of his ancestors, and upon seeing these he would be able to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

For a long time the Bwiti was considered an ancestral cult and even today, the word Bwiti is translated as "dead" or "ancestor", however, as pointed out by Swiderski (1990-91, vol. II:19), its correct etymology may come from "Mbouiti", the proper name of a group of Pygmies currently occupying a region between Gabon and Zaire. Originally, the practice of Bwiti included human sacrifice and ritual anthropophagy. This fact is remembered in the Bwitist myth about the discovery of the *iboga* and the sacrifice of the first woman who ingested it, Bandzioku. Soon, however, Bwiti rid itself of such cruel components and substituted these rituals by sacrificing chickens. The news about Bwitist human sacrifices dwindled and there are now a few remaining critics in some sectors of the Gabonese population, particularly the Catholics who still wage defamatory campaigns against the Bwitists.

To be sure, accusations of criminal sorcery and the so-called diabolic illusions produced by *iboga* have always been part of the history of Bwiti from its inception. Subsequently, the persecution carried out by the missionaries with the approval of the French colonial government was felt by the Bwitist communities particularly during the years 1920 to 1940. Despite the burning of the temples, persecution and killings of religious leaders the movement continued to grow.

Bwiti was and still is a thorn for the Catholic missions and actually Bwiti continues to gain new ground in the combat for religious territory. Having courageously survived years of constant

persecution, Bwiti has been reformed and contributed to the awakening of a national and anti-colonial conscience and the birth of the new Gabon Republic. The first president of the newly formed Republic was an initiate in the Bwiti religion which contributed to its resurfacing and to its growing acceptance.

Today, the Bwiti religion is well accepted by a sector of the governing elite, since it is considered a popular religious movement which keeps and guarantees tribal values which are considered fundamental to the spirit of the new republic. Government officials, members of the police and the army are Bwiti initiates and regularly leave the city to participate in the night ceremonies taking place in the neighboring jungle villages.

The Bwitists consider themselves Christians. That is, "the real Christians", which is of course a sore point among Catholic missionaries who consider the Bwitists bedevilled, dedicated to Satanic cults, while disregarding the promiscuity among the many Africans who frequent their parishes. Bwitist criticism of Christianity became deeper and more coherent when the expansionism practices replaced past persecution: "The Catholic church is a beautiful theory for Sunday, the *iboga* on the contrary is the practice of everyday living. In church, they speak of God, with *iboga*, you live God" (from words by Nengue Me Ndjoung Isidore, ecumenical Bwitist religious leader, presently Magistrate in the Libreville Supreme Court, quoted in [Swiderski 1990-91, vol. I:628](#)). The *iboga* used by the Bwitists during the initiation rites and in their night communal "masses" substitutes the host of the Catholic mass, in practice and in concept, and this substitution is the fuel for the harsh contact between Catholics and Bwitists.

Internal Structure

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Bwiti is a complex religion with a rich mythology, the fruit of an intelligent and secular mix of the afro-tribal values and the catholic biblical figures, and an articulate theology which coherently unites animistic concepts and the characteristics of a Christian god. This syncretic mix is continually evolving; in practice, since its inception Bwiti has never ceased to renew itself, in its outward form and in its content. The free interpretation of the values expressed by the Bwiti movement has resulted in the creation of many sects, each with its own founding father and its own peculiar relationship with Christianity. The presence of one Bwitist leader with an acute critical mind or with a prophetic/static-like quality is sufficient to bring about a change in the community and a new religious current.

Each Bwitist sect has its own temple which is distinguished by the diverse decorations on the *akun* or central axis of the temple. The *akun* is covered with symbolic motifs associated with the *axis mundi* or cosmic tree. Regarding content, the Bwitist sects are different from one another, according to the degree to which Christian values have been absorbed. Among members of those sects leaning more toward tribal values, the following is a common proverb: "Baptism and *Iboga* are incompatible", but for members of sects involved with Christianity it is not uncommon that they attend Sunday mass after having participated in the Bwitist mass Saturday night.

The Bwitist communities are "open", that is, their rites are not secret (the real secret is the inability to communicate the experience of initiation) which gives freedom of access to the non-initiates; this can be seen from its proselytism.

There is no rivalry among the different sects and there are individuals who have been initiated into two or more sects. The sects consist of groups of 10 to 50 people, usually living in the same village, where the Bwitist temple is symbolically located in one of the most accessible streets. Surrounding the temple (*abeñ*), *iboga* bushes are cultivated and respected by all.

When no services are being held, the temple is used as a place for social gathering, a place for meeting and talking, a space which offers protection. The temple also serves as control center since from its interior one has visual control of the village. The *abeñ* is an ample hut, with wooden walls and roof, consisting of two principal rooms, the ceremonial room and the "sacristy". The entire structure resembles the structure of a human body, the pole supporting the roof is the spinal cord, the ceremonial room is the body, the "tomb" seen at the end of the ceremonial is similar to an altar, and the site for the musicians is considered its heart, the *akun* is

its penis, the sacristy is its head and the two doors opening to the ceremonial room are its ears. In the interior of the sacristy a sort of niche built in the manner of a tabernacle contains the powdered root of the *iboga* and the ceremonial spoons used to administer it.

In each community members are divided between the simple initiates (*bandzi*) and the "officiating" members of different gradations. The term officiating is given following a learning period and superior initiations. During the ceremonies each officiating member has a precise role; at the very top of the community is the *nima*, the religious leader, followed by the *yemba*, an officiating member who comments on the rituals being followed during the ceremony. Then, follows the guardian of the temple and the tabernacle, then the dance director and the musicians among which the harpist has a special function. Together with these mostly male officiating members is found the woman responsible for female affairs (women are the majority in most Bwitist communities). All the officiating members of the cult live like the rest of the village and are usually married (among the Fang, male polygamy is prevalent).

The Initiation Rite

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The cycle of rituals of all Bwitist sects is based on a religious calendar similar to the Catholic one. The main difference being that the Bwitist rites are conducted at night, as are most rituals connected with the use of hallucinogens. The members of the community get together at night from Saturday to Sunday, and at Christmas and Easter time, at which times they partake of the *iboga* (*ngozé*) as communion.

Apart from those times when they all get together, the individual initiation rite is experienced by those desiring to join the community and it consists primarily of the ingestion of a large dose of *iboga*, much larger than when taken during the normal *ngozé*. This factor takes the initiate to an altered state of consciousness, to static-mystical states, to a direct contact with the sacred. The occurrence of such initiation leads us to consider Bwiti as a *complete* psychedelic religion, that is, having an initiating impact which results in great alteration of the individual's consciousness. Among the Bwitist the moment of initiation is the moment of greatest illumination and must be taken into consideration for the rest of the initiates' life: in each moment of crisis, the Bwitist goes back to the time of initiation, thus putting himself at the best strategic point of observation.

At the initiation rite, the ingestion of the hallucinogen is preceded by an offering to the jungle and its trees, and a confession in front of the officiating members and a ritual bath. The confession covers all past life. The omission of sins may result in a "bad trip" with disastrous consequences and even permanent madness, and should the omitted sin be related to homicide, the death of the initiate will ensue.

The effects of the massive dose of *iboga* (a few hectograms of the powdered root) which the initiate must ingest little by little during 7 to 12 hours, last three consecutive days and nights. During this time the initiate will remain lying down on the floor of the sacristy, assisted by a couple considered as the "father" and "mother" of the initiation process. Besides the "parents" other members of the community are present, they will accompany their future brother in his long journey to the sounds of the harp or in silence. Any of the present members may ingest *iboga* during these nights: a companion during the "great journey" also experiencing the effects. The initiate's consciousness will undergo changes more and more intense, becoming more separated from his surrounding reality until he loses touch. At this time, usually during the third night, an officiating member will pinch the initiate with a thorn to ensure his separateness with exterior world. If he does not react, it is understood that he is undergoing the climax of the experience. The moment is acknowledged in western terminology using the term beatific vision or *epopteia*. This moment is referred to by all Bwitists so "baptized" as going to the root of life itself and direct dialogue with god.

During the vision, the initiate undertakes long journeys to the land of the dead, who serve as mediators with the divine. He may also encounter his ancestors or other persons known to him. Others find celestial figures during their journey, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, St. Peter, shedding their divine light. Others have direct encounters with God. The hallucinations

experienced during the trip are full of profound symbolic meaning, personal as well as cultural; the world of the jungle with its trees, plants, and animals acts as an experimental and imaginative substrate for the visions. Always during the vision the spirits of the dead, Jesus Christ or any other entity tells the initiate his new name, the initiatory name (*nkombo*), a name which is added to the initiate's proper names. As an ecstatic religion, the Bwiti relies on the hallucinogen and the subsequent personal psychic experience to duly introduce its doctrine. It is the initiatory experience which brings about an act of faith, an act which follows the moment of illumination; this act of faith in Christianity always must precede any show of conviction: "il faut voir pour croire" ("one must see to believe") is a common proverb in all Bwitist sects, in polemic contrast to "it is enough to believe" as the Catholic mission preach. Bwiti is a "revealing" religion, that is, it constantly reveals: it reveals itself to the individual during each initiation.

The great majority of the founders of Bwitist sects were inspired to start a new sect during personal experiences with *iboga*, "by revelation". On the other hand, there is no shortage among the Bwitists of prophetic currents of exquisite ecstatic character. Such is the case of Ekan Ngoua, founder of the sect Essum David, who was considered by all a mystic; he died during the 1960's and has followers among the many communities proliferating around his religious discourses: "I have seen God, for the *iboga* is God, I am a prophet. When I was initiated, I was not seeking *iboga*, it was not something I willed, it was God itself who took over me. I am a prophet, I know what comes from afar, I know what will happen tomorrow. When God talks to me, when the Spirits talk to me, they tell me what must be done with *iboga*. (...) I must unify all Bwitist sects and establish only one *iboga* religion" (cf. Swiderski 1990-91, vol. I: 465-6).

Following the three days and nights of the initiation, the initiate wakes up to what he considers a new life. Some times energetic intervention on the part of the officiating member is necessary to wake up the initiate and at times the loss of consciousness may continue into the following days. This is interpreted as a positive sign since it is taken to be contact with the divine. Only on rare occasions has the initiate failed to wake up and died. As in the rare instance of a "bad trip", *iboga* is not considered the cause, it is the individual who is responsible, because of his impurity and bad thoughts.

Upon awakening, the individual relates his experience to the community, and others have the opportunity to corroborate their visions. After this, he is considered a *bandzi* in every regard. A long sleep which may last days concludes the rite of initiation. This *iboga* baptism may be experienced at any age, as is the Catholic baptism. Currently, in some sects there is a tendency to initiate relatives, especially their children, from ages 8 to 10, which is followed by a second initiation as adults. The great freedom of interpretation of the Bwitist canon allows for big changes in the modalities of the initiation. In some sects the initiates are free to undertake further strong experiences with *iboga*, but these are not to be undertaken without the assistance of an officiating member.

The Night Ceremonies

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The *ngoze*, or customary night ceremonies represent the Bwitist mass; these are times of collective religious fervor and joy and feasting, they are prepared for communion with *iboga* and for a close understanding among all participants. It is also a time for loving each other, and this leads to a collective feeling during the final portion of the ceremony in the early morning hours, the entire community experiences a collective flow of emotions resulting in what the Bwitists call *nlem myore* ("one heart only"), that is, a state in which "the people understand one another," and they become as one. [Fernandez \(1965\)](#) has termed it "a state of symbolic consensus." It is a mental state of good will towards others, which is typical of a certain phase of the psychedelic experience, the final part of the "rebirth" phase. It is interesting to note that the Bwitists value it and recognize it; an indicator of the transcultural aspects of some of the effects of the hallucinogens.

The *ngoze* take place all year on Saturday night through Sunday morning. Some communities prefer to meet every month, two months, or three months, for three consecutive nights. At Christmas and Easter, considered the two great Bwitist festivities, the ceremonies are performed

in ritual cycles of four or more days.

At the beginning of the ceremony, around 8 p.m., the participants ingest the *iboga* communion: they kneel and each receives a dose delivered by an officiating member directly to the mouth in a spoon. As with the Christian host, *iboga* is not to be touched with the hands. To facilitate deglutination, a small amount of water may be drunk. The amount of the dose varies according to the individual and has been determined by the officiating member distributing it. Throughout the night and until a predetermined hour, anyone may request additional *iboga* with the approval of the officiating members.

The Bwitists are well aware of the importance of the dosification of the hallucinogen to bring about the desired positive results for the collective experience. For example, they know that with strong doses it is more likely the individuals will lose their sense of reality, which is contrary to the spirit of the *ngoze*. Therefore, the custody and distribution of *iboga* is in the able hands of the officiating group.

Throughout the night the participants dance, play and sing. They dress in different colors, white, blue, yellow, according to their particular sect or the day of the week. With their faces made up with white kaolin, they fall under the effects of *iboga* and dance long and exhaustive dances of the most pure African tribal spirit.

The dances are guided by precise choreographic schemes. The most common dance is a long line of people who move in the interior of the man-temple; each person repeats the movement of the person in front and this movement originates with the first man and moves down the line from first to last. All this to the rhythm of several musical instruments: the musical bow, batons and other percussion instruments, and during the second part of the night, the sacred harp (*ngombi*). Once in a while they rest, drink, laugh and make merry.

The drinks offered by the participants at the beginning of the ceremony are distributed with a certain ritualism during the rest periods. Besides orangeade, and coca cola, preferred by the women, there is also beer, palm wine, and several battles of strong liquor widely consumed by the men. The presence of alcohol at the *ngoze*, a masked presence following its ritual distribution, is not new among cults using hallucinogens, but it contrasts with the general tendency which sees it as incompatible with the ingestion of alcohol. When questioned about this, the Bwitists response was that alcohol allowed them to dance for long periods, as many of the dances are over one hour long as confirmed by the watch of one of the officiating members. Some also said that alcohol was used as a physical enhancer, while the mind was dominated solely by the effects of *iboga*.

Outside the cult, the Bwitists do not drink alcohol, so that its presence at the ceremonies is not due to a chronic social use. During the *ngoze* I saw many times the interchange and consumption of cola-nuts which have stimulant properties (they contain caffeine) so it may be that the Bwitists use alcohol as a physical stimulant as well. Some sects, however, do not allow alcohol during the rituals and the new ecumenical movement presently developing within the Bwiti religion, excludes alcohol from the rituals of all sects.

The different cycles of music and dancing contain symbolic and precise meanings associated with Bwitist mythology. During the night ceremony there are two distinct phases: the first one lasts from sundown to midnight, it is characterized by motifs illustrating the creation of the world, and the birth of Adam and Christ. The second phase lasts from midnight till dawn, and is influenced by the imagery of death and destruction, the death of Christ, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the universal flood, the death of the night. Towards the end of this final part, the whole community enters a state of total participation, the *nlem myore*, "only one heart."

With the coming of dawn, the ceremony will end with a collective meal.

Bwitist Mythology

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Bwitist mythology consists primarily of a complex theogony and mythology dealing with the origin of *Iboga* and the Bwiti know it as "The History al *Muma*." Despite the evidence of its primary structure, the mythology is subject to many variations, as evidenced by the differences among the sects and the diverse ethnic groups. This is also seen in the various interpretations of the myth that have arisen during the last century resulting in the creation or reform of the Bwitist movements (cf. versions taken from Fernandez 1972; 1982 and Swiderski 1980; 1990-91).

The Bwitist do not have written texts for dissemination of their beliefs, except for some "catechisms" which are difficult to read but may be considered as a timid attempt. Given the new current phase of internal coordination and union of the many expressions of the Bwiti religion, it is anticipated that soon there will be Bwitist bibles and catechisms where the rich mythological patrimony of this religion will be recorded.

At the vertices of the Bwitist genealogic theogony is the one god, Nzame Mebeghe, a god similar to the Christian god, yet less angry and vengeful (there is no Bwitist hell), but which marks Bwitem as a monotheistic religion. In the beginning, Nzame created an egg from which triplets were born, Eyene, None and Gningone, which more or less correspond to the Sacred Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This last one is substituted by a feminine figure, Gningone, considered the mother of the Black race; in some sects this figure takes the place of the Virgin Mary. Among the Fang, as well as among other African groups everything related to mother earth, to the feminine principle, and fecundity retains its primary value and this has brought about a special status for the Catholic Marian cult.

To be sure, the Bwitist interpretation makes reference to the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament and does so in depth. For example, the original sin of Adam and Eve, Obola and Biome, considered twins, is seen as an incestuous act; the Tree of Good and Evil, or the tree of knowledge, is identified as the *iboga*; Abel's remains become the remains of the ancestors (*bieri*); the Universal Flood becomes the Ozambogha, the Fang's difficult journey from Cameroon to Gabon, an event historically placed at the beginning of the century.

The "History of Muma," the history of the discovery of *iboga* and the origin of the Bwiti has several different versions not only among the Fang people, but also among the Apindgi, the Mitsogho, and the Eshira. In spite of the fact that the Bwitist trace back the origin of the knowledge of *iboga* to the Pygmies, and though some Pygmy tribes are said to still use *iboga*, not much is known about the *iboga* rituals in this archaic group. Among the Fang, the myth goes as follows.

Bandzioku, usually of pygmy ancestry, lost her husband during the crop of fruit in the forest. He fell from a tree and death surprised him. His body remained hidden in the forest and Bandzioku, after looking in vain for her husband's body, was inconsolable and returned to the village and as prescribed by tribal rule, she married her brother in law. One day she went fishing and built a net to catch Siluros, but through a hole at the bottom instead of Siluros, human bones came up. They were the bones of her first husband. After she had deposited the bones on the shore of the river, an animal came and took them away. Bandzioku followed the animal until they came to the Kakonangonda cave. From the interior of the cave the voices of the spirits of the dead called out to her, "Bandzioku, do you want to see us?", ... "yes" she answered. Then the spirits fed her the root of the plant growing in a corner of the entrance of the cave: it was the *iboga*. After she ate of it Bandzioku could see and talk to the spirits of the dead, and among them was the spirit of her first husband. Before departing, the spirits asked her for an offering (*okandzo*), she gave them what provisions she had and returned to the village.

The following day she got up early, gathered food supplies, and went back to the cave to make offerings, continuing to do so for several days. Her second husband, thinking she had a lover, decided to follow her without being seen. When she came up to the cave, the spirits hollered "Muma, Muma" (which indicates the presence of a non-initiate) and asked her who had she brought. Bandzioku had thought she was alone, she turned and saw her husband. He was upset and asked her whom she was talking to; she pointed to the *iboga* plant and gave him of the root to eat. Thus, the husband too was able to see and communicate with the spirits, including the

spirit of his dead brother. At that moment, the spirits asked the man for the *okandzo*, the obligatory offering; he gave them what little he had. The spirits rejected the offering and he had no other choice but to offer his wife (which was what the spirits really wanted). In this manner was how Bandzioku was sacrificed and strangled. The man took the *iboga* back to the village and built the first Bwitist temple. The final human sacrifice, mentioned in every version, comes from the cultural environment from which the first Bwiti appeared and is associated with the old cult to the ancestors. Other aspects of this cult must be seen as coming from a more archaic tribal mythology and having undergone stratified re-interpretations throughout the times.

The *Duna* Mushroom

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There is surprisingly another fact in other versions of the myth; together with *iboga*, a mushroom named *duna* plays a significant symbolic role. In these versions, the spirit of the dead tell Bandzioku to put the *iboga* roots on top of the mushroom, using it as a plate or a basket. They could also ask her to eat the *iboga* root placed on top of the mushroom, or they could request that she eat *iboga* together with the mushroom. [Fernandez \(1972: 246; 1982: 636\)](#) had already pointed out the importance and the urgency to check whether or not this mushroom found in the reality and mythology of the Fang is psychoactive, but to this day its taxonomic classification is not known. [Raponda-Walker & Sillans \(1961: 457\)](#) have made reference to an apparently edible mushroom called *dune* by the Fang, *duna* in Bakele, and *kuna* in Mitsogho; it is said to resemble a big funnel-shaped hat, with many vegetating filaments, which may be the size of a human head. The bulk of this white mass, dried and mashed, is used in certain sorcery rituals. Fernandez' informants also made reference to the evidence of the ingestion of this mushroom in its powdered form to obtain psychedelic effects, such practice also exists within the Bwiti (Fernandez 1972: 246). Yet, to the people of the Nganga Dissumba sect, the *duna* mushroom is the symbol of the brain of the first man to die (Swiderski 1990-1991, vol. V: 79).

In the course of my own personal investigation of the Bwitists as well as other individuals encountered in Gabon, I confirmed the fact that this mushroom is still part of the collective memory of the Fang. For example, a man named Joseph in Libreville informed me that this mushroom is associated with sorcery, that it grows in the nearby forest, that it is round, its external color is dark and it is white within. It is ingested with other vegetables to obtain visions during sleep. Its bark is used to manufacture fetishes. According to this man, the mushroom was never used together with *iboga*. The Bwitist chants of old make reference to non-specified mushrooms which may bear symbolic association with the tattoos, and surprisingly, also with lightning ([Raponda-Walker & Sillans 1962: 217-8](#)). Apart from the Bwiti, in the folklore and popular tales of this geographical area, there have been recent ethnomycologic reports of special interest.

All this seems to indicate that in this zone of Equatorial Africa there exists the knowledge and utilization of psychoactive mushrooms, especially in the past. Besides, the relationship of man and psychedelic mushrooms would not appear to be a recent development in Africa, as is demonstrated by recent ethnomycologic studies ([cf. Samorini 1992](#)). It may be that with the discovery of other hallucinogenic vegetables (*alan*, *iboga*) the mushrooms (at least the *duna* mushroom) may have been gradually substituted in the religious rituals. Its current use, therefore, could only involve certain singular Bwitist environments, or in association with the *iboga*, or sorcery.

Psychotherapeutic Aspects of the Cult

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There is no lack among the Bwitists of individuals with great interest in the healing of the sick. We see this frequently in the practices in which the hallucinogen plays a key role in the identification of the cause of the illness and its possible cure. For the Bwiti, this psychotherapeutic aspect of the use of *iboga* brings many communities and even entire sects together, which in turn come closer to the aims and practices of the Ombwiri, an influential healing society existing within the same ethno-geographical boundaries as the Bwiti. The Ombwiri also involves the use of *iboga*. Through the ingestion of the plant, the sick person

makes contact with the *imbwiri*, genies with human form living in the invisible world, divided into water, earth or air, and this communication results in either the cure, or at least important information as to the sickness and how to cure it (for example, which plants to use).

In addition to *iboga*, the Ombwiri have an important vegetable admixture made from a large group of plants called *ekasso*. The preparation must be ingested by the sick man at a precise moment during the ritual. It is not clear, at least for this writer, if this mixture has psychoactive properties or if it is used to get the body ready for ingestion of *iboga*. In the myth on the origin of the Ombwiri, which is somewhat similar to the history of Muma for the Bwitists, the spirits of the dead signal the first woman to ingest it, the *iboga* as well as the *ekasso*, and thus contact them. Today, in many different Ombwiri communities, *iboga* is one of the principal ingredients of the *ekasso*.

Around 40 *imbwiri* genies are known, each one identified under the group of illnesses it can cure, or use for punishment when taboos are broken in their own field of action. The Ombwiri temples are similar to the Bwitist, with a central symbolic axis and surrounded by *iboga* plants tended with care. The new ecumenical Bwitist movement foresees the unification, or rather the incorporation of the Ombwiri to the Bwiti religion and the number of members initiated in both cults continues to grow (Swiderski 1972). At the present time, within the Bwiti, there are emerging serious ecumenical movements which are trying to unify the sects rather than abolish them. Erudite religious leaders working with the different communities see the need to unify the cults and redefine the rituals under a common liturgical plan. Their principal aim is to obtain recognition by the Government of Gabon which would put the Bwiti on the level of Christianity and Islam. One of these leaders, Owono Dibenga Louis Marie, has during the past few years created the "Iboga Youth Movement," so that the new generations may get better acquainted with the Bwitist creed. He is also a founding member of the "Missama Abiale awu Enin Mbe Mbe" (the *Iboga* Initiates Association), frequently abbreviated as "MA2E", which sets the trend for the interchange between the sects, a requirement if unification is to take place.

The syncretic imagination and the tremendous dynamism which characterize the Bwiti throughout its history have contributed to make it a continually expanding established religion, a spiritual movement which may in the near future become one of the great pure African religions of Western Equatorial Africa.

Notes

¹ *Iboga*, or *eboka* (*Tabernanthe iboga* Baillon) is a perennial shrub, with small yellow flowers and orange fruits of elongated oval shape. Its thick roots (both, primary and secondary) are used as hallucinogens. The roots are scraped, dried and powdered; its flavor is an aromatic bitter and when ingesting it, the interior of the mouth becomes numb. The *iboga* plant is considered "mature" after four years. Because of this the Bwitists have adopted a system whereby the plants are rotated by age group, and the secondary roots are partially eliminated in each plant so that it may continue living and producing other roots. The most important active component of the roots is the indole alkaloid ibogaine (Raponda-Walker & Sillans 1961; Pope 1969; Gollnhofer & Sillans 1983). [return to article](#)

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